

WANDERERS FALTER AT STORTFORD

By STUART EARP B Stortford 1, Wycombe W 1

WYCOMBE Wanderers surrendered two valuable Rothmans Isthmian League points on Saturday when they were held to a 1-1 draw at Bishop's Stortford. Wanderers, having had the better of a first half which included two penalties, sunk deeper into the mud in the second and now trail leaders Enfield by 11 points.

The draw brought their run of 10 league victories grinding to a halt. And it could all have been so different had numerous chances been accepted in the first 45 minutes. There were at least five opportunities to hit that elusive net and yet the only way Wanderers could find the target was via a penalty.

It is goals that are going to win the championship this season and if the Blues fail to retain their title, they could well look back to Saturday, April 5 at Rhodes Avenue for one of the reasons why. But there's still a long way to go, 11 more matches have to be completed and anything could still happen.

Wanderers, however, will need to play a lot better than this, especially tonight against Enfield, if they are to fulfil their aims.

Analysing Wycombe's failure — and it must be described as a failure, it seemed their main downfall was in midfield. It is not often all three players, Mick Holfield, Terry Reardon and Howard Kennedy, are off form at the same time. But against Stortford none of them really got going and Wanderers suffered as a result. Holfield was eclipsed by Dave Lawrence, Reardon was too nonchalant while Kennedy looked thoroughly jaded. The effect on Wycombe was obvious. Their supply of ball was limited and the front runners received very little service all afternoon.

Facing Wycombe were a side of only fair ability but what they lacked in skill, they more than made up for by sheer effort and hard work rate. The Blues were never given a moment's peace as the home side chased and harried them into errors and this effectively threw Wanderers out of their stride. In their defence, the visitors could rightly claim they were not helped by a lenient referee, but the fact of the matter is, Stortford worked harder and deserved their draw. There were no stars in their side — all 11 ran for each other and made life as difficult as possible for their opponents.

At first, Wycombe overcame this enthusiasm. John Maskell was involved in minor

fracas with Martin Smith early on which ended with the latter receiving a stern lecture from referee Drew and in the eighth minute, Wanderers made their first goalscoring chance. Alan Phillips sent a long through ball towards the Stortford half. John Mears had ample time to pass back to Terry Moore but delayed a fraction too long. Perrin slid in front of the defender and hooked the ball towards the net but Ivan Johnson raced back, got his toe to the ball and deflected it onto the upright. From there it bounced safely into the arms of the goalkeeper.

Searle fired over the top and John McKenzie headed the ball the same way before Wycombe again missed a chance for that all-important opening goal in the 20th minute.

From their first corner, Horseman curled the ball to the near post. The defence half

cleared to Holfield who powered in a shot which was too hot for Moore to hold. Phillips turned and hit the rebound straight at the 'keeper. Two minutes later Wanderers were denied a penalty when Tony Blacktin tackled Searle inside the box.

At this stage, despite the missed chances, things were going well for Wycombe. They held the whip hand and were finding each other well with neat passing. Then suddenly, they found themselves one down in the 29th minute. Paul Watson ran to the edge of the box and crossed from the bye-line. Holfield cut the ball off with his arm and the referee immediately pointed to the spot. Smith sent the ball well wide of Maskell.

The Blues hit back quickly. Mead saw his powerful header fisted over by Moore in the 31st minute and then the 'keeper saved a similar effort from the hard

working Searle. But with 38 minutes gone, Wanderers levelled the scores.

Holfield and Horseman played a neat one-two with Holfield racing into the box. With him went Tony Martin and in a desperate bid to stop the cross, the full back sent Mick crashing to the turf. Mr. Drew was just as emphatic about this penalty and Tony Horseman, whose last spot kick was back in December, placed the ball expertly past Moore's right hand. Holfield must have been relieved, having given away the first spot kick and then won another.

Before half time Wanderers had the chance to take a lead with them into the second half. Maskell sent a massive goalkick into the home half. The ball bounced over Blacktin, then Johnson, leaving Searle a clear route to goal. But as Moore advanced, the centre forward allowed the ball to travel just too

far and the goalkeeper blocked its path and then gathered.

Even so, with 45 minutes gone, Wanderers must have been fairly satisfied. It was in the second half they really began to deteriorate, however, with their passing going badly astray and midfield petering gradually out of the game altogether.

Stortford made most of the running, feasting on the amount of ball given away by their opponents and Kevin Mulkern brought a fine save from Maskell with the half only four minutes old. Mulkern, incidentally, played once or twice for Amersham Town in their Hellenic League days. He has certainly come a long way since then.

Even in these early stages things began to go wrong for Wycombe. Dave Alexander took too many risks at full back and got himself into unnecessary trouble while Wanderers' insistence in playing the ball short through the middle proved easy meat for the home side.

Dave Bullock replaced Alexander with 60 minutes gone and later almost snatched the points for his side. But Stortford also had their chances to take the honours. McKenzie netted only to be ruled offside while Moore, who had been almost redundant in the second half, was brought into action when saving Horseman's corner in the 69th minute.

After that, the second half disappeared into obscurity with a flow of mistakes and the referee's whistle dictating events. Only in the last few minutes did the game come alive again. In the 89th, Wycombe went within centimetres of the winner. Horseman, as accurate as ever, sent an inch-perfect corner into the six yard box where Bullock got up well to send in a looping header. Moore was beaten all the way as the ball struck the crossbar and bounced out to Perrin. In those few seconds, however, the 'keeper had time to recover and then snatch Perrin's follow-up header safely.

Back came Stortford. Mulkern's 90th minute volley could have gone anywhere but roared straight at Maskell and then McKenzie hit the side-netting in injury time. A goal then, by either side, would have been an injustice, however, for neither club deserved three points from this match.

STORTFORD: T. Moore; A. Martin, I. Johnson, T. Blacktin, J. Mears; D. Lawrence, M. Smith, K. Mulkern; R. Little (sub. P. Leaky 83 mins); J. McKenzie, P. Watson.

WYCOMBE: J. Maskell; D. Alexander (sub. D. Bullock 80 mins), K. Mead, A. Phillips, G. Hand; M. Holfield, T. Reardon, H. Kennedy; A. Horseman, K. Searle, S. Perrin.

Referee: P. Drew (Upminster).
Half-time: 1-1. Goalscorers: Stortford — Smith (29 pen); Wycombe — Horseman (38 pen).